DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 690 HE 033 544

TITLE	College-Going Rates: What Are They and What Do They Tell Us? Update.
INSTITUTION	California State Postsecondary Education Commission, Sacramento.
REPORT NO	CPEC-99-1
PUB DATE	1999-02-00
NOTE	9p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.cpec.ca.gov.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Bound Students; College Freshmen; *Enrollment; Ethnic Groups; *High School Graduates; High Schools; *Higher Education; Racial Differences
IDENTIFIERS	*California

ABSTRACT

This document highlights California's current college-going rate, examines the trend in California's college-going rate over time, presents differences in college-going rates for students of various racial-ethnic backgrounds, and, to the extent possible, attempts to place California's college-going rate in a national context. In 1997, 54.9% of California's high school graduates enrolled as first-time freshmen in a California community college or other college. Over the past decade, the number of high school graduates in California has been steadily climbing, but the college-going rate has remained relatively constant, showing a slight decline between 1996 and 1997. There are significant differences in college-going rates for the major racial-ethnic groups. Recent public high school graduates of Asian descent have the highest public college-going rate at 67%, while recent Latino public high school graduates have the lowest public college-going rates at 42.5%. Considerable differences also exist between various regions in California in the proportion of recent high school graduates who enrolled as first-time freshmen in California's public institutions of higher education in 1997. California's college-going rate is among the highest in the nation, although a relatively small proportion of these graduates enrolled directly in baccalaureate-granting institutions. Overall, it appears that the college-going pattern in California was consistent with the policies embedded in the state's Master Plan for Higher Education. (SLD)

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College-Going Rates: What are They and What do They Tell Us?

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Update 99-1 *February 1999*

Each year, the Commission reports the percentage of California's recent high school graduates who enroll as first-time freshmen in one of California's three public systems of higher education or in a California independent institution. This figure, commonly referred to as the "college-going rate" or "college participation rate" has been an important component in higher education planning for California. This document highlights California's current college-going rate, examines the trend in California's college-going rate over time, presents differences in college-going rates for students of various racial-ethnic backgrounds, and, to the extent possible, attempts to place California's college-going rate in a national context.

How does the Commission define college-going rates?

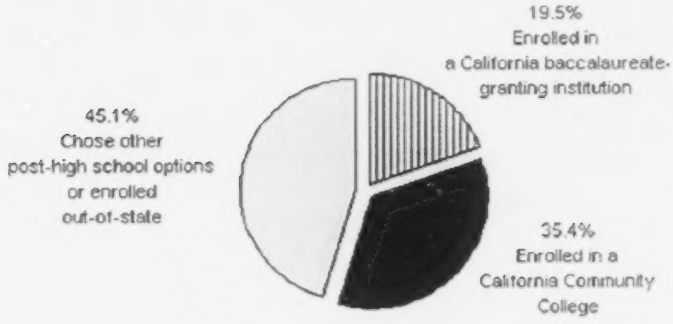
To determine the college-going rate, the Commission considers the number of students who graduated from a California public or private high school in a particular academic year and contrasts that figure with the number of students age 19 or under who enrolled as first-time freshmen in one of California's public institutions of higher education or in a California independent institution the following fall. While staff cannot say for certain that the students age 19 or under who enrolled as first-time freshmen in higher education are necessarily those who graduated from high school the previous 12 months -- due to the limitations of currently available data -- this calculation provides the most accurate estimate of college-going rates available at this time. The Commission continues to seek an expanded student information system in order to enhance the accuracy of information on the progress of students from kindergarten through graduate degree attainment.

What is the most recent college-going rate for California?

In 1997, 54.9 percent of recent California high school graduates enrolled as first-time freshmen in a California community college, a campus of the California State University or the University of California, or an independent college or university in California. The remaining 45.1 percent of recent high school graduates made other choices -- to enter the workforce, to join the military, to enroll in a private postsecondary or vocational education institution, or to attend a higher education institution in another state, for example. Approximately 15,000 or five percent of California recent high school graduates enrolled as first-time freshmen in higher education institutions outside of California in 1996.

As intended by California's *Master Plan for Higher Education*, the California Community Colleges enrolled the largest proportion of recent high school graduates as first-time freshmen. Display 1 indicates that nearly 35 percent of recent high school graduates enrolled in one of the California Community Colleges, while 20 percent enrolled in California's baccalaureate-granting institutions -- either public or independent -- in 1997.

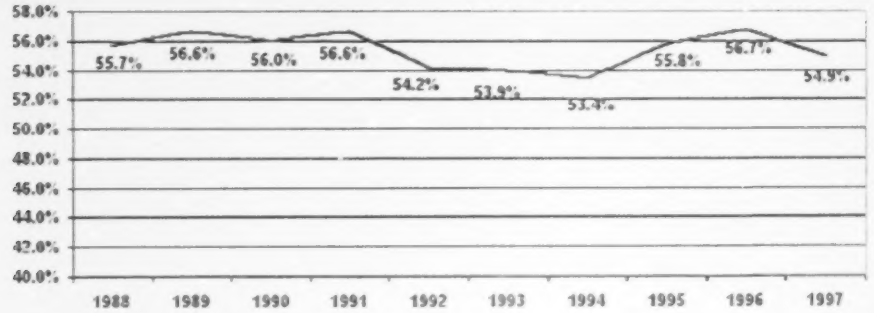
DISPLAY 1 College-Going Rate by Institutional Type



How does the current college-going rate compare to previous years?

Over the past decade, the number of high school graduates in California has been steadily climbing. Even so, California's college-going rate has remained relatively constant -- varying within approximately three percentage points, as Display 2 illustrates. During the past 10 years, the rate has been as high as 56.7 percent in 1996 and as low as 53.4 in 1994. Following two consecutive years of increases from 1994 to 1996, the college-going rate declined by 1.8 percent between 1996 and 1997.

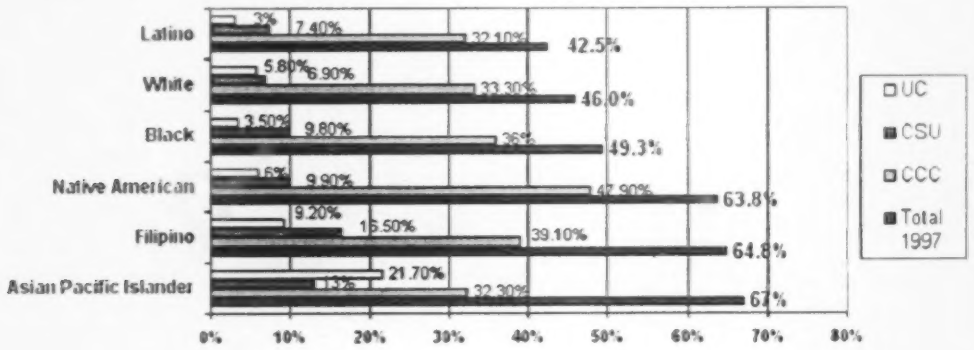
DISPLAY 2 College-Going Rate, 1988-1997



Do college-going rates differ by racial-ethnic group in California?

There are significant differences in college-going rates for the major racial-ethnic groups in California. Display 3 illustrates the college-going rate for public high school graduates who attended public institutions of higher education in California by racial-ethnic group in 1997. Recent public high school graduates who are of Asian descent have the highest public college-going rate at 67 percent, while recent Latino public high school graduates have the lowest public college-going rate at 42.5 percent.

DISPLAY 3 College-Going Rates by Racial-Ethnic Group (Public High School Graduates Attending Public Institutions of Higher Education Only) in 1997



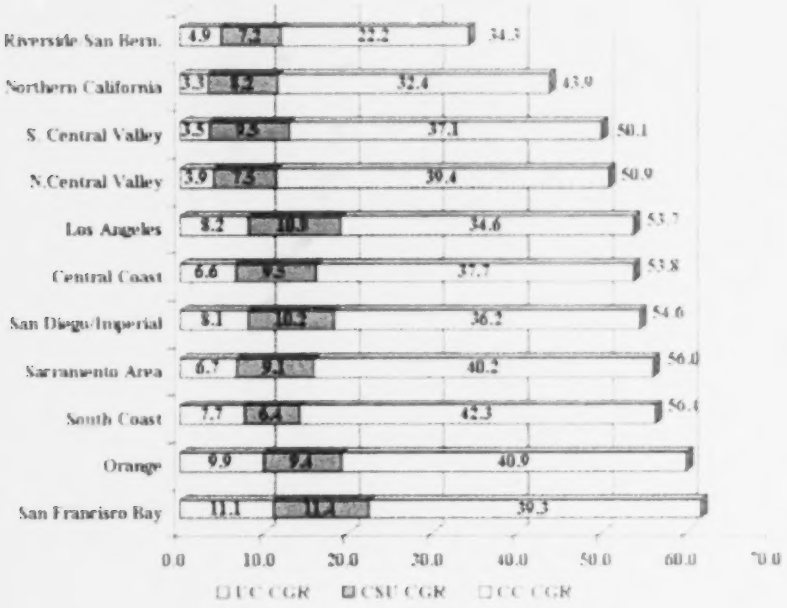
Caution is urged concerning this information because it reflects only those students who attended a public high school and who chose to attend public institutions of higher education in California. It does not take into account private high school graduates or the students in independent colleges and universities nor does it take into account those students who chose to attend institutions outside of California. Ideally, a complete portrait of the differences in the college-going rate between and among racial-ethnic groups would include those students as well. However, the information available for these institutions contains insufficient detail to be included here.

Do college going rates differ by region in California?

Considerable differences exist between various regions in California in the proportion of recent high school graduates who enrolled as first-time freshmen in California's public

institutions of higher education in 1997. Display 4 on page 4 illustrates the public college-going rate for 11 regions of the state. The San Francisco Bay area led the state with 61.8 percent of its graduates enrolling, while the Riverside/San Bernardino area had the smallest college-going rate -- about 34.3 percent. Among the numerous factors that affect a region's college going rate are the number and accessibility of college preparatory courses, the accessibility of information about student financial aid, the availability of support services such as tutoring and mentoring, the academic attainment and socio-economic level of the adult population in the region, the number and variety of postsecondary institutions located in a region and the programs they offer, and the economic opportunities afforded by business and industries in the region as well as the educational qualifications necessary to take advantage of these opportunities.

DISPLAY 4 Regional College-Going Rates, 1997



How does California's college-going rate compare to the national average?

College-going rates provide important quantitative information about the percentage of recent high school graduates who enroll as first-time freshmen in California's higher educational institutions. To facilitate broader understanding of access to higher education for recent high school graduates in California, a comparison with the college-going rates of other states may be beneficial. According to information from the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES), California's college-going rate is among the highest in the nation. When considering recent graduates who enrolled as first-time freshmen in institutions within their respective state and those enrolling in institutions out of the state, California was sixth nationally in 1996 -- the latest year for which national data was available. Only New York, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Delaware, and Rhode Island had higher college-going rates. Display 5 illustrates the college-going rates for the ten most populous states by rank as well as the states with the highest and lowest college-going rates nationwide.

In reviewing the information contained in Display 5, it is critical to be cognizant of the enormous size of California's K-12 population relative to that of other states. In 1996-97, there were approximately 5.6 million students enrolled in California's public schools -- far more than Texas which has the second largest K-12 public enrollment at 3.8 million students. Other states are faced with many of the same challenges as California in maintaining and improving its college-going rates, however, the sheer size of California's student population undoubtedly adds to the complexity of this task.

DISPLAY 5 National Comparison of College-Going Rates, 1996; High/Low Range and Ten Most Populous States

	National Rank	State	Total College-Going Rate	Baccalaureate-Granting Institution Rate	2-Year Institution Rate
HIGH	1	New York	72.1	52.3	19.7
	6	***California***	***66.9***	***27.1*** *(rank 48th)*	***38.9*** *(rank 1st)*
	7	New Jersey	65.4	48.3	17.0
	10	Illinois	64.5	39.1	25.4
	15	Michigan	58.9	42.8	16.0
	18	Pennsylvania	57.8	46.7	11.1
		NATIONAL AVERAGE	*56.2*	*40.0*	*16.0*
	30	Texas	53.0	32.6	20.4
	35	Ohio	52.6	40.1	12.5
	37	Georgia	52.2	39.6	12.7
	44	Florida	48.8	28.3	20.5
LOW	50	Nevada	39.7	30.5	9.2

Note: Chart includes all students who enrolled as first-time freshmen either within their home state or in an out-of state institution within 12 months of high school graduation. It includes students enrolled as first-time freshmen in both public and independent institutions of higher education

While California's overall college-going rate is relatively high when compared to other states in the nation, Display 5 highlights a significant difference in student enrollment patterns among the states. A much larger proportion of California's college-going rate can be attributed to enrollment in its community college system than is the case in other states. Approximately 38.9 of California's recent high school graduates who are first-time freshmen are enrolled in a community college -- well above the national average of 16 percent. The proportion of this state's recent graduates who enrolled in a baccalaureate-granting institution -- 27.1 percent -- is substantially below the national average of 40 percent. Only Mississippi with 26.2 percent and Wyoming with 25.8 percent enrolled a smaller percentage of their recent high school graduates as first-time freshmen in baccalaureate-granting institutions. As such, California ranks 48th in the nation among the 50 states in college-going rates to a baccalaureate-granting institution.

It is important to note, however, that the variation in college enrollment patterns is a function of many different factors, not the least of which is the manner in which higher education is structured in each state. For example, the two-year college systems in some states are not comparable to California's community college system and a few states do not have a public community college system at all. This fact is undoubtedly reflected in both the number of first-time freshmen enrolled in higher education in each state and in the college enrollment patterns of these students. It is also reflected in the national average for the proportion of recent graduates enrolled in both two-year and baccalaureate-granting institutions as first-time freshmen.

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What do these numbers mean?

At least two conclusions can be drawn from the information presented above:

- Compared to recent high school graduates nationally, a relatively large proportion of recent high school graduates in California enroll in postsecondary education immediately after graduation.
- The college-going pattern in California was consistent with the policies embedded in the Master Plan for Higher Education. That is, a large proportion of recent high school graduates enrolled as first-time freshmen in the California Community Colleges.
- Compared to other states, a relatively small proportion of recent California high school graduates enrolled directly in baccalaureate-granting institutions.

In addition to these conclusions, however, the information presented above points to some complex policy questions. Among them:

- To what extent is California's near-bottom ranking in college-going rates to baccalaureate-granting institutions simply a reflection of the Master Plan, as it was intended, or the manner in which higher education is structured in other states?
- Should additional steps be taken to increase the proportion of California's first-time freshmen who enroll in baccalaureate-granting institutions?
- To what extent are college enrollment patterns a reflection of eligibility and academic preparation rather than choices made for other reasons, such as cost, location of institution, or institutional reputation, for example?
- What further steps might be taken to ensure greater affordability for recent high school graduates who encounter financial barriers to college enrollment and how would these efforts affect the college-going rate?
- How effective are efforts to provide students and their parents with information so that they can plan to attend college, such as college admissions requirements and availability of financial aid, and to what extent would improvements in this area affect college-going rates?
- What are the implications of enhancing efforts to increase college-going rates on the capacity of the institutions to accommodate additional students given burgeoning public school enrollments?
- What are the implications of college-going rates for degree production and an adequately trained workforce?

Why are college-going rates important?

College-going rates play a critical role in higher education planning. Perhaps most importantly, college-going rates assist in estimating the number of students who are likely to seek college admissions in the future. By examining the college-going rates over time, analysts can project, with some degree of certainty, the number of students expected to seek enrollment to the state's colleges and universities, particularly when considering economic factors and demographic changes. But in addition to projecting enrollment demand, examining college-going rates can facilitate a better understanding of a wide variety of educational matters when considered in conjunction with other indicators. For instance, college-going rates, when examined along with other information, provide a basis by which education analysts, policy makers, and the public can make assessments about the institutional efficiency of our public schools, the

effectiveness of student academic development programs, the significance of college awareness programs, the efficacy of admissions policies, and the accessibility of financial aid programs. A downward trend in college-going rates would likely encourage policy makers and educators to examine more deeply the potential causes, while an upward trend might suggest that recent changes in curriculum or public policy, for instance, may be yielding their desired result. College-going rates can assist in determining the effectiveness of educational reform efforts undertaken at the elementary and secondary level. However, by themselves, college-going rates provide policy makers and educators with little insight into difficult and more subjective questions, such as whether California is adequately preparing its students for admission and enrollment in college and for their roles as citizens and workers.

Equally as important as ensuring that a large number of California's high school graduates enroll in college is ensuring that these same students, once in college, succeed and complete their academic goals. For this reason, other indicators, such as college graduation rates, persistence rates, and time-to-degree, should be considered, along with college-going rates, in reaching any conclusions concerning the effectiveness of California's educational system.

What are the policy implications of the recent college-going rates?

Today, approximately seven out of 10 jobs require some form of postsecondary education. Further, the types of industries expected to experience the most significant growth in the coming years increasingly require an educated workforce. As a result, it is likely that college-going rates will assume new importance as policy makers, educators, and the public grapple with ensuring that California produces enough skilled and educated employees to maintain these industries and fill the higher paying jobs that they provide. Additionally, as the diversity of California continues to change, maintaining or improving the college-going rates as well as college persistence and completion rates for all racial-ethnic groups and for both genders will be critical to sustaining California's social and economic cohesion. The realities of the 21st century require that more effective ways be found to ensure full participation and success in higher education for increasing numbers of California students. This goal is worthy of support by our educational systems, by policy makers, and by the public.

Further information may be obtained from the Commission's Research Staff
(916) 445-7933 or via e-mail at ResearchStaff@cpec.ca.gov.

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